

Holy monstrosity: A study of François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux*

by

Olivia Leno

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Major Professor
Dr. Kathleen Antonioli

Abstract

In a world painted black and white, monsters are always evil and they always seek to destroy what is good, with or without reason. However, twentieth-century Catholic novelist François Mauriac, in his *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, proposes that the matter of monstrosity is not so easily defined. In a mysterious preface to the novel, Mauriac employs a Baudelarian epigraph that brings murkiness to this definition: “O Créateur ! peut-il exister des monstres aux yeux de celui-là seul qui sait pourquoi ils existent, comment *ils se sont faits*.. ” (13, italics original). Through the words of Baudelaire, Mauriac questions the nature of his protagonist Thérèse, a “semi-empoisonneuse,” and in the process of doing so, revolutionizes the Catholic novel and the role of women in literature. In this paper, I intend to prove that Mauriac’s departure from the typical Catholic novel and its clichéd protagonist brings complexity to feminine representation by analyzing a “monstrous” female protagonist.

Through analysis of historical development of the Catholic novel, as well women’s roles (inside and outside of literature) during and after World War I, this paper seeks to demonstrate that François Mauriac’s representation of women is groundbreaking in comparison to literary works at the time. Mauriac dismisses the pious prototype of the Catholic novel and instead chooses a dark and “monstrous” woman as his creation. This paper will examine Thérèse’s refusal of societal roles as wife and mother, as well as Mauriac’s tone, in order to demonstrate the revolutionary portrayal of a monster as his protagonist.

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An Introduction: Who are François Mauriac and his beloved *Thérèse Desqueyroux*?

François Mauriac, a liberal Catholic author, used his writing as a razor-sharp critique directed towards the rigid and unmoving bourgeois society of twentieth-century France. His sharply pointed observations on French customs were recognized by many during his lifetime. On June 1, 1933, Mauriac was elected into the Académie Française and soon after, in 1952, won the Nobel prize for Literature for “the deep spiritual insight and the artistic intensity with which he has in his novels penetrated the drama of human life” (Nobel Media). Through his unique and misfit protagonists, Mauriac makes harsh observations about the nature of money, religion, and socially ordained roles during the twentieth century. His most famous critique of societal customs appears in his best-known work, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927), the protagonist of which also features in three sequels: *Thérèse chez le docteur* (1933), *Thérèse à l’hôtel* (1933), and *La Fin de la Nuit* (1935).

The first installment, which this study will analyze closely, follows the story of Thérèse Desqueyroux, a young Catholic bourgeoisie, shortly after she has been acquitted for attempting to poison her husband with his own medication. Thérèse, who is married to a man she does not love and mother to a child she does not want, is held in a “captivity” of sorts. Given that a public divorce would only bring shame to the Desqueyroux’s formidable reputation, Thérèse is forced to spend her days wasting away in the family’s house at Argelouse. The novel quickly traces Thérèse’s adolescence and then her exile in the country as she embarks on a search for her identity, which has been lost amidst the roles that her family and society as a whole have given her.

The development of Thérèse’s character in her search for self-identification directly applies to what I intend to analyze in this report. Mauriac, by creating a protagonist who is also a criminal, brings complexity to the idea of what it is to be evil. While this report will

discuss the darkness that lies behind Thérèse's attempted murder, as well as her motivation behind this decision, my study seeks above all to analyze Mauriac's treatment of his protagonist. The primary objective of this report is to investigate Thérèse's identity as a "monster," proposed by Mauriac's epigraph to the novel, taken from Baudelaire: "O Créateur ! peut-il exister des monstres aux yeux de celui-là seul qui sait pourquoi ils existent." In doing so, I intend to prove that Mauriac's devotion to a "monstrous" character brings ambiguity to what it is to be a monster in his fictional world. I also intend to prove that Mauriac's representation of a female protagonist quickly departs from the typical feminine and religious archetypes belonging to literature before and after World War I. I will first give historical and critical context about François Mauriac, important events relevant to the novel, women's social standing, and the form of the Catholic novel. I will then provide insight into what other critics have said about *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Third, this analysis will explore Mauriac's tone and treatment of his unlikely protagonist, Thérèse's social role in relation to other supporting characters, and, finally her rejection of these roles.

A history of Mauriac and his beloved *Thérèse*

Thérèse Desqueyroux, which was enthusiastically celebrated at the time of its release and throughout the twentieth century, is no longer an extremely popular subject among literary critics and scholarly articles. Many articles and analyses of the novel date between 1930-1999; there are a few articles that lie beyond the 2000 mark, with even fewer past 2008. However, there are still numerous articles and texts that were essential to the research of this report, most especially for my analysis of the themes of religion, or more specifically, Catholicism, and women's role in society.

To understand why Mauriac's portrayal of Thérèse should be considered rare, it is important to first understand the broader context of the social situation of women and their

depiction in literature after the First World War. In Mary Louise Roberts's *Civilization without Sexes*, Roberts explores the role of women in French society during the interwar era. Roberts describes the gender conflict that was brought on by the devastation of World War I. According to Roberts, many contemporary critics believed that women had gained too much independence (26), given that many men had left for war, thus requiring women to fill in the jobs men would normally take. Men returned from war and became distraught after finding that their wife or sweetheart no longer resembled the "civic" representation (Roberts suggests that this is a mother or nurse) of prewar France(33). The First World War, which was already "emasculating and dehumanizing" (31), separated the gender roles even more. Eventually by 1922, "la garçonne" appeared (46).

This term, which derives from Victor Margueritte's renowned, scandalous novel *La Garçonne* (1922), describes a woman who abandons convention: she smokes, has short hair, wears masculine clothing, and leaves behind corsets (Roberts 46). While this novel was extremely successful, it created a large amount of controversy because it discussed an unmarried woman and her sexual exploits in Parisian society. However, what made the novel even more scandalous was that the main protagonist came from a Catholic bourgeois family; this novel became revolutionary for its harsh critiques against the marital practices and societal roles of the bourgeoisie. Many considered it to be a novel that could scandalize or, even worse, cause "a loss of self" (46). While this novel explores the exploits of an unmarried woman who moves to Paris (which was considered a place of debauchery post-war), the protagonist bears a strong resemblance to Mauriac's Thérèse, who marries into a Catholic bourgeois family simply for appearances and also attempts to reject her reality. This resemblance begs the question: why, then, would Mauriac, a respected Catholic author of the early twentieth century, decide to write a sympathetic novel about an evident "garçonne?" This report is, in many ways, an attempt to answer this very question.

This question demands an even more detailed answer when considering Thérèse's other feminine role as a mother. Roberts, in her chapter on maternal roles in society during and post-World War I states that there are two roles for women: "la femme moderne" and "la mère de famille nombreuse", the first being selfish and frivolous, the second being saint-like and dutiful (126). The mother is devoted to her family, generally belongs to the working class, and shows characteristics of being nurturing and self-sacrificing, whereas the modern woman belongs to the bourgeois class, lives for herself, and despises anything that stands in her way (especially children) (128-129). Since the modern woman refuses to have children, she slowly slips into immorality, while the mother becomes morally regenerated, as she continually denies herself for the sake of her family. Roberts paints a colorful example with the novel *Le Bonheur*, in which the protagonist marries "la mauvaise femme moderne," Elyane Parisot, while continuing to have an affair with his mistress Louise (130-132). Elyane refuses to have children and when she does, in fact, become pregnant for the first time, she has an illegal abortion that causes her to grow bored and isolated, yet after she reconciles with her husband and gets pregnant for a second time, she begins to resemble a gentler, more maternal role; suddenly she is redeemed morally (134-136). This distinction between the two types of women belonging not only to literature, but also to society, will prove important in my analysis of *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Thérèse seemingly belongs to the category of the reviled "femme moderne," but Mauriac staunchly refuses to cast a negative light on Thérèse, and rather portrays her as a victim among the male "monstres".

Mauriac utilizes these rigid social roles, described by Roberts, in order to emphasize Thérèse's captivity, which this study will analyze more closely. She is a woman caught between two roles, on the one hand the dutiful mother and wife, on the other a woman who desires "to live her own life," in Roberts's words (120). Mauriac depicts Thérèse's despair after the trial, as well as throughout her life. She chooses to poison her husband because she

cannot stand her reality as a “*mère de famille*” and constantly dreams of being a “*femme moderne*”. Mauriac’s sympathy surfaces through his descriptions of the detrimental effects of a society where a woman is desperate enough to poison her husband due to her lack of freedom.

Some Mauriac scholars also observe this representation of Thérèse and her conflict between the two roles as a wife and mother. “Dieu et Maman” (1974) by Kathryn E Wildgen, discusses the role of Mauriac’s female characters in his novels. Wildgen suggests that Mauriac possesses great sympathy for his protagonist, “She jumps into a disastrous marriage with a male version of the *petite âme ménagère*, attempts to kill him, and yet retains all of the creator’s sympathy” (Wildgen 18). Wildgen additionally states that because of Thérèse’s positive attributes, Mauriac is “chiding women for hiding in the house [and] excoriating the practice of loss of self in offspring...”(18). While examining a scene where Thérèse dreams of a more liberated lifestyle, Wildgen implies that Mauriac’s sympathy for Thérèse, as well as his hopes for her helps Thérèse herself abandon her preordained role as a wife and mother. This article directly supports an idea that my study seeks to prove: Thérèse gains her freedom at the end of the novel by becoming a “*femme d’aujourd’hui*,”(18) or perhaps as Roberts would say, a “*femme moderne*”. Wildgen’s decision to dub Thérèse a modern woman suggests then that Thérèse no longer belongs to a societal role. My study intends to more deeply analyze Mauriac’s deliberate involvement with Thérèse’s fate at the conclusion of the novel. She is free to live on her own in Paris and discuss her philosophical ideas and he places this innate desire in Thérèse and makes no mention of her desire to be a mother nor married to a man whom she does not love. Thérèse is unlike any of her family members in the novel because she wants to identify herself differently from the others.

Thérèse has a desire to be different from the rest; she does not want to belong to a typical female role, whether that be the mother or wife, but it seems her family is unwilling to

allow this freedom. “Aussi réelle que l’autre”: Alterity in Mauriac’s *Thérèse Desqueyroux* by Ej Gallagher, (2003), analyzes more closely the Desqueyroux and Larroque families and how they affect one another. According to Gallagher, Anne, Bernard, and Aunt Clara are all given roles by the patriarchal society and they never attempt to question them, but rather accept them blindly. Aunt Clara represents the “spinster” of the bourgeois class and Thérèse marries Bernard in order to avoid this role. Bernard becomes the masculine equivalent of an old maid in the conclusion of the novel, and Anne represents a submissive woman (211). Gallagher writes, “Bernard and his mother succeed in finally controlling Anne...Anne too becomes a mouthpiece for the family” (Gallagher 210). Bernard and Thérèse’s fathers represent their traditional male roles, and Mauriac portrays them both in a negative light. Although Thérèse attempts to act as the faithful and submissive wife and mother, she soon realizes as the novel continues that it is futile to apologize for who she is, and the reader watches her grow more conflicted in her search for self.

These critics agree: Thérèse is an underdog, and in some situations, a victim. While she commits a crime, it would seem easily justifiable given her social situation. However, there are other critics who are reluctant to agree to this interpretation. In their views, Thérèse is a criminal and she is in fact the “monstre” described in Mauriac’s epigraph. “The Multiple Murders of Thérèse Desqueyroux” (1970) follows Thérèse’s stream of thoughts throughout the novel, most especially in her interactions with Bernard. C.F. and Edith R. Farrell imply that she is violent by nature and that she attempts to murder Bernard, as well as herself. The author does not necessarily take sides against her, but suggests that she reacts in the way that she does because of her lifestyle (206). Her daydreams are no longer a place of escape and this is what leads to the attempted poisoning of Bernard. The authors consider this to be natural behavior for Thérèse, stating “She poisoned Bernard when her frustration reached the point where fantasy would not relieve it, but this act is only different in expression, not in

nature, from her normal behavior” (Farrell 206). Similarly, “Violence and Sacrifice in Mauriac’s *Thérèse Desqueyroux*,” by Timothy J. Williams (2001) explores the theme of violence and, specifically, sacrificial violence throughout the novel and how violence is a rejection of society. Williams suggests that Thérèse has “escapist daydreams” (179) in which she cures a child; she becomes powerful with her ability to heal. Williams also states her “exile” is an annihilation and that it will return her family’s daily life to what it was before she attempted to poison her husband (172). The article continues to describe the terrible social circumstances of Thérèse and how she resorts to violence to escape her problems. Williams also acknowledges the use of violence and how Thérèse uses this to release her emotions. Williams states, “There can be no doubt whatsoever that she considers her own violence to be a reaction against the existing structure of violent suppression among the Desqueyroux” (171). While Williams emphasizes that it is due to her circumstances that she acts this way, it highlights her “monstrosity” and desire to hurt in order to escape her problems. This gives reason behind the action, but takes away an element of complexity to her character. My study strives to prove that Mauriac’s representation of Thérèse is more deeply complex due to his devotion to his “mauvaise garçonne”. If Thérèse were motivated purely by violence, if she is simply a “monstre,” the story would not exist.

Critics consider Mauriac’s decision to develop ambiguity around what it is to be “monstrous” or to even write about a so-called “monstre” as a revolutionary departure from the previous form of the Catholic novel. Anne Loddegaard, in her 2008, “The Silence of God in the Modern Catholic Novel: French Catholic Novelists Adopting a Pascalian Deus Absconditus Perspective on Faith, Truth, and Reason,” explores the role of God in narration in the works of Graham Greene, Julien Green, Georges Bernanos, and Mauriac. In order to show how each of these authors reformed the Catholic novel, Loddegaard explains that before World War I, in the “Catholic revival novel”, authors created stories about stock

characters, in which the protagonists embodied all that is saint-like and God interacts and intervenes with the storyline (Loddegaard 2). These novels were very literal and the characters who experienced a conversion did so, often times, in an unrealistic manner (2). However, after the First World War, and perhaps due to the harsh realities it brought with it, the form of the Catholic novel changed.

In 1926, Pope Pius XI condemned the “reactionary, monarchist movement espoused in the *Action française*”, thus indicating an acceptance towards the secular state. Loddegaard suggests that this acceptance led to a shift in subject matter for the Catholic novel. Instead of grand acts of faith, the authors turned towards individual descriptions of faith, where there was no longer a “divinely omniscient narrator” but rather narration was “restricted to a purely human omniscience, so to speak, expressed through extensive use of psycho-narration” (4). This type of narration brings the reader even closer to the character, but this also complicates actions, virtues, and sins, as one can see clearly in the case of Thérèse. The reader, like Thérèse herself, spends the majority of the novel wondering about the motive behind her attempt to poison her husband Bernard, but the question is left unanswered and Thérèse ventures into Paris with an ambiguous fate. Loddegaard states that Mauriac’s lack of a fabricated resolution allows for another new aspect for the Catholic novel: there is an “open-ending,” thus creating a more realistic platform where the author cannot force a conversion (4). While Mauriac cannot force a conversion, he gives his protagonist free will--she is able to decide whether or not she will be good or evil.

Mauriac’s departure can be recognized not only through his preface, but also in the way he ends the novel. The novel’s introduction, written by Jean Collignon, gives various insights into the story, as well as the author himself. After giving numerous details about his background, Collignon briefly describes his relationship with Thérèse, stating “[Mauriac]

insists on scrutinizing the sincerity of [the Desqueyroux]'s religious feelings and makes it his speciality as a writer to satirize... Inwardly of course, Mauriac regrets Thérèse's indifference. But at the same time, he heartily agrees with her criticism of Bernard's religion" (9). Collignon even suggests that Mauriac cannot change his creation's opinion and that is why he leaves her to Paris, which leaves the preface's question unanswered. And Mauriac, being a liberal Catholic, would be following Catholic doctrine, meaning Thérèse, along with the rest of humanity, has *free will*. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines free will as the following:

God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.²⁶

Man is rational and therefore like God; he is created with free will and is master over his acts²⁷ (Catholic Church).

When one uses this then to analyze Mauriac's actions as an author, one can assume then that Mauriac wishes for Thérèse to have a life of her own and make her own decisions. This treatment of the protagonist reflects Mauriac's personal beliefs, not only about religion, but also about the ambiguity of humanity, or in the novel's case, the ambiguity of what defines good and evil. Baudelaire's words, which question the reality of monsters, when it is only the "Créateur" who can truly know why they exist and act the way they do, casts a mysterious and merciful light on Thérèse. Mauriac alone knows why she exists and what role she will play, but in order to render her story more realistic, Thérèse follows her own path. As Collignon suggests, Mauriac does "abandon" Thérèse, in some ways, at the end of the novel. However, this seems less like abandonment and more of an opportunity for Thérèse to enact her free will.

Mauriac himself addresses his departure from a forced conversion narrative and his separation from the fate of his character in his short piece for *Le Figaro* on November 15, 1952, “Vue sur mes romans”. Mauriac discusses the critical reception of his novel. A variety of critics were distraught over his lack of judgement and punishment of his protagonist. Mauriac gives the following defense of his decision:

On m’a reproché de juger mes héros et de jouer au Dieu avec eux. Thérèse Desqueyroux au contraire est l’être qui échappe à tout jugement et d’abord au sien propre, terriblement libre à chaque instant, et regardant sa figure éternelle se dessiner au moindre geste qu’elle hasarde. Mais il est vrai que par le seul titre d’un autre livre, *La Pharisienne*, j’en juge et condamne l’héroïne: ce qui est un crime selon la technique préconisée aujourd’hui... Nous sommes libres de juger ou de ne pas juger nos créatures selon qu’elle appellent le jugement ou qu’elles y échappent, selon que nous avons résolu de dessiner un caractère ou d’exprimer une destinée (Touzot 167).

Mauriac admits, in this passage, that he was criticized for allowing his character to escape condemnation. He also admits that his treatment of Thérèse is rare even in his own œuvre, as he has already judged the heroine of a previous novel. Mauriac’s refusal to judge his protagonist, when he has already condemned more than one of his characters, as well as brought about the conversion of another (see *Noeud de Vipères*, 1932), confirms even more that the novel *Thérèse Desqueyroux* departs from the Catholic novel tradition and seeks to portray a more complex character, while also highlighting her search for self-identity amidst the rigid societal customs of the bourgeoisie. While Mauriac goes on to mention that his aim is to open the hearts of many through Thérèse’s story, it is evident that Mauriac is revolutionary. This appears not only in his departure from the typical Catholic novel protagonist and its characteristics, but also in his treatment of a woman; most especially a woman who is guilty of attempting to murder her husband for “no reason”. Mauriac’s treatment of Thérèse, a woman who would otherwise be condemned, ultimately allows her story to be developed.

Several critics have also contributed to the idea of Thérèse's complexity as a protagonist of the Catholic novel, as well as the purpose of her story. A few suggest that Mauriac's treatment of his protagonist is, indeed, unique, arguing that Mauriac creates a criminal and endeavors to describe her life while avoiding judgement of any kind, but rather working towards portraying a "criminal" with profundity. "Despair and Hope in *Thérèse Desqueyroux*" by Alistair B. Duncan (1988), examines Chapter 10 of the novel as a whole. Duncan states that the death of Aunt Clara comes as a form of "salvation", for Thérèse, even if it does not last long. She had become devoted to Aunt Clara, due to her compassion and lack of judgement with Thérèse's crime. Thérèse had been considering suicide shortly before the news of her aunt's death and the sadness brought with this revelation brings about a moment for Thérèse to pray for God's mercy (169). This desire to ask for mercy sheds light on her ambiguous nature; can Thérèse really be a "monstre" if she desires mercy for others? For a fleeting moment, the reader almost gets a glimpse of her motivation in attempting to poison Bernard and more of an insight of her complexity as a character. Thérèse sympathizes with her aunt and the local parish priest, who both technically belong to the bourgeois society that Mauriac constructs.

Thérèse's ability to sympathize with her aunt, but also for two other secondary characters, helps her character evolve. In "Aussi réelle que l'autre" (2003), E.J. Gallagher draws on the connection between Thérèse, Jean Azévédo, and the local parish priest. Gallagher writes, "For Thérèse, it is the curate's solitary life which intrigues her and which makes her see him so like her, for he leads, like her, an apparently desolate existence" (Gallagher 213). Thérèse and the local priest in town share similarities because they both live a life of solitude, which also implies they are both misunderstood and suffering. While this article does not make an explicit stab at religion, it does portray religion and the clergyman in a more positive light, thus allowing for Thérèse to make a connection with someone who

belongs to the faith. Gallagher's contradictory claim also casts a harsher light on the Catholic bourgeois family and their lack of devotion to the actual Catholic faith itself, but more so towards the superficial qualities such as a spotless reputation. This proves, yet again, that Mauriac abandons the typical Catholic form of the novel and chooses an unlikely protagonist to shed light on the hypocrisies of bourgeois Catholicism.

While these texts begin to hint at Mauriac's unique treatment of religion and the female protagonist, my analysis of the novel seeks to portray more fully Mauriac's departure from the depiction of a holy and pure feminine persona, as well as a departure from a world that is black and white where "monstres" are evil and their lives are desolate. In this novel, hope, redemption, and depth rest with the misfits of society and they abandon those who take it for granted (the Desqueyroux family). Mauriac's departure from archetypes is not only present in his depictions of Catholicism, but also of women.

The relationship between the "Créateur" and his "monstre"

François Mauriac's relationship with his "monstre" takes a rare form. Mauriac grew up in Bordeaux during the late nineteenth century, and experienced a life similar to that of his protagonist. He was born into a tightly-knit, respectable Catholic family; in his childhood, he experienced very little suffering. Mauriac also showed a lively interest in contemporary events. In 1906, Madame Henriette Canaby of Bordeaux's Chartrons district was put on trial for attempting to poison her husband with arsenic (Bertrand 120). Mauriac, then a young man, attended the trial and was inspired by Madame Canaby's attempted and unsuccessful poisoning of her husband. According to Celine Bertrand, author of "L'affaire des Chartrons : une 'semi-empoisonneuse' bordelaise à la Belle Époque", several elements of Canaby's trial are echoed in Mauriac's fictional novel (120). For example, Henriette Canaby possesses an elevated social status and belongs to a famous family in Bordeaux. The story of Madame

Canaby and her role as a “semi-empoisonneuse” motivated Mauriac’s idea for his most famous novel. The historical foundation, as well as Mauriac’s background, predict a certain type of novel. If Mauriac had decided to, quite literally, stick to the script, Thérèse would be sent towards damnation or a conversion, rather than an ambiguous and open-ended conclusion. Instead, he does not cast judgement. In fact, the novel spends very little time describing the trial or the crime itself, but rather it follows the story of Thérèse before and after the incident. The novel dismisses the legal aspect of the story; it does not seek to prove innocence or guilt, but rather it seeks to portray a dark, mysterious, and perhaps “monstrous” criminal in a different light.

Mauriac’s unusual portrayal of a monstrous criminal and his sympathetic tone are present throughout the novel, but most especially in the beginning of the text. The text is introduced by an epigraph by Charles Baudelaire:

Seigneur, ayez pitié, ayez pitié des fous et des folles ! O Créateur ! peut-il exister des monstres aux yeux de celui-là seul qui sait pourquoi ils existent, comment *ils se sont faits*, et comment ils auraient pu ne pas se faire... (original italics, 13).

In this citation, Baudelaire questions the nature of humanity and its darkness, wondering “peut-il exister des monstres aux yeux de celui-là seul qui sait pourquoi ils existent” (13).

Baudelaire’s epigraph immediately sets up the tone for the novel: the investigation of human nature and monstrosity. The apostrophe in the epigraph creates ambiguity: to whom does “Créateur” refer, God or the author? The answer seems to be both. Both writers, Baudelaire and Mauriac, were raised with a Catholic upbringing. While Baudelaire’s Catholicism differs from Mauriac in numerous ways, Baudelaire would have been alluding to God. Baudelaire also, in many of his poems, portrays the poet as a god, or in this case, the “Créateur”. By using Baudelaire’s epigraph to introduce the novel, Mauriac enacts Baudelaire’s double meaning. Mauriac speaks to God as Creator, but also implies that he himself is the “Créateur” of this “monstre” who attempted to murder her husband.

The preface that follows this epigraph echoes Baudelaire's proposed complexity of a monster's creation. Though the novel itself is written in a close third person style, the preface addresses Thérèse directly, using "tu" to indicate a familiarity and intimacy with the protagonist. The narrator mentions a shared glance between the two (critics have suggested that this echoes Mauriac's biographical attendance at the trial of Madame Canaby in the early 1900s, though it cannot be said that Thérèse's background and trial relate directly to Canaby's). He states "tu me dévisageais"(13), indicating that Thérèse stares directly at him. This shared glance underlines a sort of intimacy between the two. She is surrounded by others, but she only looks at him. This intimacy between the narrator and protagonist intensifies as he writes: "mais plusieurs qui pourtant croient à la chute et au rachat de nos âmes tourmentées, eussent crié au sacrilège"(14). The notion of "nos âmes tourmentées" implies that the narrator and Thérèse suffer together, perhaps for the same reasons. Regardless of the reasoning, their mutual disposition permits them to find kinship. The narrator acknowledges her loneliness by defending his intention to portray her story, stating "Les 'coeurs sur la main' n'ont pas d'histoire; mais je connais celle des coeurs enfouis et tout mêlés à un corps de boue"(14). Mauriac's usage of "enfouis", "mêlés" and "boue" evoke a sense of messiness, as well as depth. Both Thérèse and the priest's true feelings are hidden deep beneath the ground, they are twisted, and stuck in the mud. The narrator's description of Thérèse as muddy and murky acknowledge her dark past, but also show his desire to reveal a more intricate and convoluted story, one in which he is included. The narrator's defense of the Thérèse's nature and his decision to depict her life creates a sense of devotion and protection. These desires ultimately draw a more intimate link between the "Créateur" and "creation" than one of judgement or denunciation.

This intimacy continues to grow as the narrator recalls his own memories of Thérèse. He remembers her, "Adolescent je me souviens...ivrée aux avocats moins féroces que les

dames empanachées, ta petite figure blanche et sans lèvres” (13). It is obvious in Mauriac’s description that Thérèse is unlike any of the others, but more importantly she is alone and vulnerable. He contrasts her with the lawyers, who are assuredly less fierce than the aggressive presence of “les dames empanachées”. What makes these women menacing is not education or judicial power, but rather societal damnation through rumors and gossip. Thérèse is described as much more vulnerable. Mauriac describes this in his introduction where he paints Thérèse as a phantom-like image. She continues to reappear in his memory, but quietly, without saying anything. While Thérèse’s criminal acts suggest that she is a monster, echoed by the emphasis of the monstrous in the epigraph, the narrator describes her as a “petite figure blanche et sans lèvres” (13). Mauriac’s descriptions of Thérèse suggest she is without a voice, thus becoming even less like a monster. Perhaps it is her lack of vocal ability that causes the narrator, and Mauriac himself, to “abandonne” (14) Thérèse at the end of the preface, so that she may begin to pave her own way in the story to follow. The narrator acknowledges Thérèse’s hidden thoughts and motivations, and admits that the story of a more open and perhaps, typical protagonist would not produce a story as interesting or profound as he writes “Les “cœurs sur la main” n’ont pas d’histoire” (14). Mauriac’s aspiration to depict a darker and ambiguous character shows his sympathy to those who are unlikely heroes, proving that monstrous characteristics are not so easily defined. This preface to the novel illustrates, through the narrator, Mauriac’s empathy for and allegiance to an unusual hero with a dismal story, which is very much a departure from the protagonists of previous Catholic novels.

Mauriac and Thérèse’s Rejection of a Monstrous Reality

Thérèse has spent the majority of her life amongst those who do not understand her and want to turn her into a submissive woman. Closer to the end of the novel, long after her descriptions of her childhood, as well as the events leading to Bernard’s poisoning, Bernard

forces Thérèse to stay at the family's country house at Argelouse where she is kept away from her daughter and society (92). In this part of the novel, Bernard forces Thérèse to stay in the house in order to protect his and the family's reputation after her trial. Mauriac uses this imprisonment to distinguish and better define bourgeois monstrosity. First, he uses Thérèse's captivity to emphasize her lack of control against Bernard and her family. She is locked away with little to no freedom; this underlines her victimization, while also casting a negative and rather "monstrous" light on Bernard. Furthermore, Mauriac uses this part of the novel in order to describe Thérèse's retaliation against Bernard, a true monster. Thérèse has had little control over her life throughout the novel, her only means of escape is the attempted poisoning of Bernard. Her next chance for freedom lies at the country house in Argelouse, where Thérèse begins to reject her reality through her dreams while she lives in isolation. Mauriac then enables Thérèse to completely reject this lifestyle by leaving her in Paris.

While Thérèse is locked in the country house at Argelouse, she passes many of her days in bed because she cannot bear to face the monstrous reality ahead of her. She is trapped in her role as a dutiful wife and the only way she can escape this reality is by dreaming of a different life. Mauriac describes this coping mechanism : "Elle composait un bonheur, elle inventait une joie, elle créait de toutes pièces un impossible amour" (97). While she is confined to her bedroom, Mauriac gives her full freedom to do as she wishes with her own imagination. Thérèse essentially becomes a creator with the words such as "composer", "inventer" and "créer" when imagining her future. In her daydreaming, Mauriac gives her power. However, while Mauriac allows these desires to transpire in her mind, he simultaneously paints her life in a bittersweet manner. No happiness or joy exists in her life due to her lack of freedom. He also suggests that Thérèse will never discover happiness beyond her imagination, employing the word "impossible" which implies that her future is hopeless. While some could consider Mauriac's description of hopelessness as an act of

cruelty, it would seem that while the tone admits she is incapable of achieving this joy, she is still inspired to hope for it. Her hope for a different life full of joy, happiness, and love suggests the lack of it in her actual life.

Thérèse's lost sense of purpose confirms more assuredly that Thérèse is not the monster that Baudelaire describes in the preface to the novel; her desolation is a suggestion that she is, in fact, the underdog in the novel. In the midst of her hazy nights, in between sleep and consciousness, Thérèse questions her true purpose: "Sa douleur devenait ainsi son occupation et—qui sait?—sa raison d'être au monde" (99). This citation not only evokes an enormous amount of sympathy, but also shows the current state of her life. She only experiences suffering—this becomes clear with Mauriac's usage of "occupation." Her suffering is a constant state, where she finds no relief. Mauriac uses her suffering to connect back to Catholicism; suffering is a sort of purification before eternal happiness. In fact, this implies that her suffering is her job and perhaps her "raison d'être". Thérèse questions her existence, but her lack of self-knowledge solidifies that she is not, in fact, a monster (or at least she does not intend to be one). Furthermore, she asks "qui sait", which implies that she is searching for someone to tell her. This is perhaps a reference back to Baudelaire's epigraph at the beginning of the novel, where Baudelaire asks God, or the "Créateur" why it is that monsters exist.

The more time Thérèse is imprisoned at Argelouse, the more one sees the hideous reality of Thérèse's life. The "monstrous" lifestyle of the bourgeoisie offers nothing for Thérèse, so she resorts to creating a dream-like reality, where she lives alone in Paris. When Thérèse becomes sick in the middle of the night, in her folly, she begins to create this alternative reality: "Son esprit étrangement lucide construisait toute une vie à Paris...Elle parlait, expliquait son cœur..."(95). This proves that subconsciously, all she really desires is to be alone in Paris without being under the control of others. She is among "des jeunes femmes"

and “Jean Azévédo”, the former lover of her sister-in-law. where she is allowed to speak and explain her sentiments (95). Again, these desires do not seem to reflect those of a monster, who only wishes to bring about evil and destruction, but rather those of one who has been forced to follow without a choice.

Thérèse views Paris as a sort of earthly paradise, where she has a number of choices.

Mauriac describes her ideal:

Si elle avait de l'argent, elle se sauverait à Paris, irait droit chez Jean Azévédo, se confierait à lui; il saurait lui procurer du travail. Etre une femme seule dans Paris, qui gagne sa vie, qui ne dépend de personne... Etre sans famille! Ne laisse qu'à son cœur le soin de choisir *les siens* (original italics, 96).

In Paris, Thérèse has complete freedom. She has the freedom to “choisir” anything she so desires. Mauriac uses the conditional and the imperative here in order to express her longing for this reality. She would be alone, but independent, without a family to control her. In fact, Thérèse believes that she could literally “se sauverait”, implying that Paris would be an opportunity for her own redemption, where she can “gagne[r] sa vie”. Mauriac uses this dream in order to show how Thérèse fights against a bourgeois lifestyle, where she can seek redemption, although it may not be one that her family expects. This is an ultimate rejection of the family; Thérèse dreams of having her own job or a way for her to make money, without benefiting from her rich family. There is no religious aspect to this redemption, but eventually it would be a freedom from the monsters that surround her and allow her no ability to choose who she is to be or what she is to do. By continuing to live in this fantasy, and to a certain extent, allowing herself to physically waste away by smoking and sleeping (98), Thérèse inadvertently denies her existence as a bourgeois wife and mother, for it is in sleep that she is the master of her own destiny.

At the end of the novel, Mauriac allows the character of Thérèse to take control of her own life. His “abandonment” of Thérèse at the end of the novel is not something that should

be considered cruel, but hopeful. Throughout the novel, the reader sees evidence of Mauriac's sympathy. Thérèse has been locked up her whole life, incapable of making her own decisions, and this abandonment allows her to live her life without the influence of authority. This idea manifests itself several themes in the novel, most especially in Mauriac's portrayal of social roles (discussed later in this essay). However, Mauriac's tone at the end of the novel shifts quite dramatically. Gone are the heart-breaking and agonizing descriptions of Thérèse's life spent in social captivity; Thérèse leaves behind the soothing and sympathizing voice of the narrator to live her life in Paris. No longer does Thérèse agonize over her life; no longer is she forced to live in the quiet solitude of Argelouse, with only her dreams to comfort her. The phrases of the novel, which were once long, expressive, and a stream of Thérèse's thoughts, become active; she is finally doing as she wishes.

Elle décida de ne pas aller voir, cet après-midi. Jean Azévédo,--et poussa un soupir de délivrance; elle n'avait pas envie de le voir...Pourquoi rentrer à l'hôtel si puisqu'elle n'en avait pas envie? (115).

Finally, Thérèse decides. She no longer feels like doing anything, which is signified by Mauriac's repetition of "ne pas avoir envie", repeated twice on the same page. She no longer longs for the right to be able to do something, nor is she so overcome with despair that she thinks so intently or seriously. She does what she wants, because she is no longer held under strict social constraints. Mauriac's shift in tone is made more evident in these short and concise phrases.

The reader can see this most especially with the final lines of the novel:

Thérèse avait un peu bu et beaucoup fumé. Elle riait seule comme une bienheureuse. Elle farda ses joues et ses lèvres, avec minutie ; puis, ayant gagné la rue, marcha au hasard (115).

In this citation, it seems as if Mauriac casts a judgmental eye upon Thérèse. She takes up smoking and begins to put on makeup. She seems even more superficial when she laughs, alone, and takes to walking down the street without a care for her past. Thérèse becomes even

more like “la garçonne” of Robert’s *Civilization Without Sexes*, which would perhaps merit a harsher judgement from Mauriac. However, his shift in tone and his decision to abandon her actually underlines his devotion towards her. He liberates her; she has spent her whole life attempting to find herself amongst the strict and rigid roles that she is given and throughout the whole novel, we see her reluctance to live in her terrible situation. But Mauriac’s decision to let Thérèse live alone in Paris and discover herself without social pressure is kinder than any other Catholic author has allowed in the past. He knows her struggle and while he makes no intention to save her, the ending of the novel gives the reader some sort of hope that she will discover herself without influence of society. that she has power and through her imagination that she can find her sense of purpose. Mauriac employs Thérèse’s dreams as a weapon for two battles. While Thérèse uses her imagination to combat the monstrous reality she lives in, Mauriac implies that it is not Thérèse who is the Baudelarian “monstre”, but it is rather her family, or perhaps more broadly, the bourgeois society. This monstrous society forces their image of femininity on Thérèse, where she must be submissive and faithful to social doctrine.

Thérèse against the “Monstre Bourgeois”

Mauriac also uses several factors to lessen Thérèse’s monstrosity. Throughout several instances in the novel, Mauriac contrasts Thérèse with outside social factors: religion, her role as a wife and mother, and a combination of these two factors, her role in the bourgeois family. While Thérèse is surrounded by distant relatives who are evidently prominent in the Catholic bourgeois society, she is disdainful of organized religion. She is unafraid to give her opinion and Mauriac gives proof of her disdain when she admits that she does not enjoy political discourse, but is ready to express her doubts about religion (36). As Thérèse finds

little in common with her relatives, as well as with their society, we begin to see Mauriac show his disdain for their way of life as well. Thérèse's introduction as a criminal would suggest she deserves little sympathy; perhaps Mauriac would be using her as an example of a "fille perdue", who abandons her role as a wife and mother, surrounded by charitable Christians who attempt to aid her in achieving redemption. However, Mauriac illustrates the opposite side. For a larger part of the novel, Thérèse is found thinking of ways to escape her own reality and evokes a sense of empathy. The more the other characters are represented without any profundity, they begin to develop more monstrous characteristics. Thérèse is constantly questioning her purpose, not only in society, but also in life. Thus a profound spirituality and attention to otherworldliness are attributed to Thérèse, which is surprising, given her disdain for the Catholic traditions of her family. Even more peculiar is Thérèse's connection with the local parish priest.

The priest who gives daily mass at Argelouse, as well as frequenting the La Trave's residence, attracts Thérèse because he is solemn and lacking in social skills.

Les prônes du curé, touchant le dogme ou la morale, étaient impersonnels. Mais Thérèse s'intéressait à une inflexion de voix, à un geste ; un mot parfois semblait plus lourd... Ah ! lui, peut-être, aurait-il pu l'aider à débrouiller en elle ce monde confus... sa solitude intérieure, il avait ajouté ce désert que crée la soutane autour de l'homme qui la revêt (70).

Mauriac acknowledges that "le dogme" and "la morale" are impersonal to Thérèse; both aspects refer to the social aspect of spirituality. This terminology would suggest that it is not the spoken word or rules of the Mass which attract Thérèse to the priest, but rather his personal qualities. Mauriac employs physical attributes such as "inflexion de voix", "un geste" et "plus lourd" to make the priest more human. In fact, it is because he makes mistakes that Thérèse believes he can help her find a deeper meaning to her reality. Mauriac uses an exclamation to convey her excitement in finding another who shares her sentiments, a man who does not attempt to appear godly or above fault. Mauriac's use of the verb "débrouiller"

gives an image of untangling a dirty mess or rather “managing” a task that requires more than one hand at work. It is Mauriac’s representation of this clerical character that shows a certain purity and otherworldliness in Thérèse, who ultimately desires more than anything to find help in sorting out her life and role in society. While she is cynical towards the idea of religion, she finds kinship with an official of the Church. Thérèse, a “criminal” who attempted to murder her husband, becomes even less black-and-white than one would hope. It is in this connection that Mauriac shows the real function of religion in the novel. Thérèse sees the emptiness of Church doctrine and its functions when it lacks faith or desire for truth. However, she seeks a personal connection because of the purity and humanness of the local parish priest. It is his humility that draws Thérèse to the priest. She sees in him something deeper, something beyond what he represents. It is his humanity and evident interior solitude that reminds Thérèse of herself. Perhaps Mauriac is suggesting, not only by this connection, but also in his choice of protagonist, that true spirituality can be found by those who seek an interior life, as well as one of good example, not of good reputation or with family connections. Mauriac continues to build a connection between Thérèse and the local priest because of his awkwardness and inclination towards solitude, which lessens even more Thérèse’s monstrosity. The connection that he builds between the two brings light to the nature of Thérèse; a holy man finds kinship with a “semi-empoisonneuse”, because the de la Traves find fault with both characters (Bertrand 115).

The de la Traves express their observations about the priest, stating:

‘Il est très exact’, disait Mme de la Trave ; il fait son adoration tous les soirs ; mais il manque d'onction, je ne le trouve pas ce qui s'appelle pieux. Et, pour les œuvres, il laisse tout tomber. Elle déplorait qu'il eût supprimé la fanfare du patronage ; les parents se plaignaient de ce qu'il n'accompagnait plus les enfants sur le terrain de football : ‘C'est très joli d'avoir toujours le nez dans ses livres, mais une paroisse est vite perdue’ (48).

As the family begins to pinpoint the local priest's social faux-pas, Mauriac questions the family's virtue and faith, tainting even more so the image of the "de la Traves" as a devoted Catholic family. As they gossip about the habits of the priest, the reader begins to see a lack of spiritual depth, which contrasts against Thérèse's deep nature. The family notes his devotion to the Church and its practices by mentioning how he is "exact" and regular in his visits to adoration by the use of "tous les soirs", but they still find flaws in him. They do not find him "pieux" and they believe he neglects charities or "oeuvres". By focusing his public works, rather than his merits as a spiritual guide, Madame de la Trave suggests that religious figures are valued more for their public actions or social status. Mauriac uses this focus to not only describe the priest's lack of social belonging, but also to mock the family. Furthermore, Mauriac implicitly critiques the parish's discontent at the priest not devoting more time to the people of the parish and their children. Again, the family's argument is not that he defies Church doctrine or is an evil or corrupt man, but rather that he spends too much time reading and not devoting more time to causes that reap visual results and a better reputation for the parish. Rather than commending the priest on his abilities in church, they focus on the qualities that are more suitable for a society, or a "paroisse."

The family's focus on the priest's social skills or lack thereof create a negative division between the family and the priest, while allowing Thérèse and the priest to become more similar. These deepening similarities make Thérèse a more developed character, while the de la Trave family becomes nastier, superficial, and repetitive in their behavior. They complain that he "eût supprimé le fanfare du patronage", which implies that he eliminates the celebration of money given to the parish. Mauriac's usage of "le fanfare" shows disdain for the family and their priorities. "Fanfare" suggests a grand production or adoration of those who give money to a charity. In other words, Mauriac's obvious dislike for the bourgeois Catholic family becomes evident in his description of the local parish priest. The priest, who

adheres to his role as a religious man, does not fit the bourgeois family ideals, because he stresses Church values, rather than reputation and appearance. The de la Traves consider a dedication to the bourgeois and approval of those who donate money to be positive qualities in a priest, rather than his actual teachings. The family seeks a priest who approves of the superficial aspects of the religion. This blatant mockery of the family, which appears throughout the novel, calls into question the bourgeois lifestyle. The complaints of the family indicate they do not care whether he teaches them anything about religion, but rather that he appears to be in good social standing and meets their criteria of favoring those who can provide the most financial support. However, he does none of these things and he is considered unsociable for devoting time to his actual mission.

His “unsociable” qualities spark a curiosity in Thérèse, because these qualities suggest he is not so different from her. However, the local parish priest is not the only character with whom Thérèse finds similarity. While attempting to discourage her younger sister-in-law Anne, Thérèse meets Jean Azévédo, the young Desqueyroux’s lover. Jean is not well liked by the family, and this establishes their first connection. The family considers Jean as an undesirable match because he is Jewish: “Ils jurent leurs grands dieux qu’ils ne sont pas d’origine juive...mais on n’a qu’à les voir. Et avec ça, tuberculeux; toutes les maladies...”(34). Bernard states that the Azévédo family swears that they aren’t Jewish, but they can all see it, and with that they have a history of illness. In this way, they literally become outcasts of society, because they are associated with a deadly illness. The family’s obvious intolerance of Judaism creates more tension between the family and Jean, which in a sense, could make Jean more appealing to Thérèse, considering her disdain for the family and their opinions. Furthermore, Jean regards Thérèse as an equal. While they discuss his intellectual rendez-vous in Paris, Thérèse notes, “il était le premier homme que je rencontrais et pour qui comptait plus que tout, la vie de l’esprit” (60). Thérèse sees something different in

Jean. Not only does he acknowledge her intelligence, but he also acknowledges an interior life. Even though he isn't religious, his desire to live a more mindful life, which is similar to one of Christian or any religious origin, indicates that he longs for interiority as well. Thérèse sees and recognizes a depth in him that she also desires for herself, that she cannot find elsewhere. He does not want to marry socially; in fact, he does not wish to marry Anne because of her lifestyle. He knows that he cannot make her happy (58-59) because he does not aspire to live a superficial lifestyle. His desire to explore "la vie de l'esprit" is what inspires Thérèse. As the novel continues, Jean has a clear influence on her fantasies of freedom, and this is perhaps because he pays no attention to her gender, but speaks with her frankly as an equal human being. Jean Azévédo's frank and unbiased eye and the parish priest's inability to connect with the parish and her own family bring a lightness to Thérèse. Jean Azévédo's desire for philosophical discussion and, soon after, Thérèse's desire for the same, indicates Thérèse's complexity. She is disdainful of what her family holds as valuable. It is also the priest's spirituality, which is private and found in solitude, interests Thérèse more than Church rituals or the impressions of her family.

Mauriac draws on Thérèse's desire for a "vie d'esprit"(60) as Thérèse questions her own place in society. As Thérèse sits with her husband's family and considers her sister-in-law Anne's desire to be perfect, she begins to detest her life as a woman in this society. Mauriac describes her in the midst of her discontent : "Elle apercevait les êtres et les choses et son propre corps et son esprit même, ainsi qu'un mirage, une vapeur suspendue en dehors d'elle.... Sortir du monde...Mais comment ? et où aller ?" (72). This quotation shows an almost out-of-body experience for Thérèse, which ultimately reflects her lack of social place. Mauriac uses the verb "apercevoir" to emphasize that she cannot recognize herself; she merely catches a glimpse of how she is perceived. It seems, in this description, that she is passing through reality while passively watching "les êtres" and "les choses" Thérèse regards

herself from the outside, also watching the others. Mauriac generalizes the other characters, creating an opposition against Thérèse. She sees the others, but they are generalized. This generalization creates a fast-paced movement. While life continues, Thérèse is frozen, while trying to discover how to escape. He then illustrates this opposition when Thérèse takes note of her own body and mind, “son propre corps et son esprit même,” and “une vapeur suspendue”. These references suggest that she is like a ghost, or rather her place in society is missing and she will soon disappear without leaving a mark. These words accentuate Thérèse’s loss of identity. Mauriac expresses her loss of identity when she suggests “sortir du monde” and then continues to question, “comment? et où aller?”. Her question implies that there are no answers and no certainty in the life she leads. Thérèse’s internal longing to leave her society suggests that she does not belong, or rather she does but considers it to be “néant” or nothingness, and therefore does not want it. Mauriac employs an air of mystery in order to not only intensify the suspense and ambiguity in his novel, but also uses Thérèse’s internal reflections to question her societal role.

The theme of social roles plays a heavy part in deciphering the idea of monstrosity and its relation to the protagonist, as Mauriac portrays the Desqueyroux family and the Larroque family as the well-to-do Catholic families who reside in the south of France. Mauriac is deeply critical of the values of both families, as well as their desire to protect their reputations above all else. Both families are motivated by their social status and society’s perception of their lives. This is, in fact, the reason that Thérèse avoids legal punishment. While Bernard is courting Thérèse, his mother points out the advantages and disadvantages of their potential marriage: “Elle n’a pas nos principes, malheureusement; par exemple, elle fume comme un sapeur....elle est plus riche que nous” (Mauriac 32). Madame de la Trave points out Thérèse’s flaws. However, they have little to do with her religious disposition, but rather how she presents herself in society. She notes that she “fume comme un sapeur” which

implies that Thérèse smokes like an engineer or a male worker. This disdain for smoking reinforces the “mauvaise garçonne” stereotype, suggesting that Thérèse is unladylike and improper for her habits. To Bernard’s parents, this match is not the most suitable, but better than most offers, because Thérèse’s money and her family’s proper social standing will increase the social profit of their union. Mauriac employs the considerations of Bernard’s mother and of both Catholic families to underline Thérèse’s search for self-identification, as well as contrast against her character against those who take on a religious label. Thérèse’s relatives isolate her from the world and alienate her inside the walls of their grand and beautiful houses because she does not fit the proper role of a religious wife and mother; she is not virtuous, she smokes, is not beautiful, and refuses to put on airs. However, Mauriac’s descriptions of Thérèse and her desire to “sortir du monde” and question of “comment? et où aller?” present an interesting irony. Thérèse who refuses to stick to a religious code, desires to abandon this world. Her language, reminiscent of spiritual terminology, implies that Thérèse is closer to finding God and freedom from the material world than her relatives, who rarely speak of anything pertaining to religion. It is Thérèse’s searching for her purpose, whether it be through Jean Azévédo’s philosophical discussion or that furthers her complexity and shows her ability to change, whereas the stock-like descriptions of her family would suggest a different type of monster than the reader is expecting.

The Bourgeois Social Roles: To be or not to be?

Thérèse’s lack of social role and her uncertain identity muddle the imagery of her as a monster. She does not necessarily choose to be evil; in fact, Thérèse chooses very little for herself. She is subject, almost always, to controlling male authorities. The evidence of Thérèse’s lack of self-determination is emphasized at the beginning of the novel when she, her father, and her lawyer depart from the court. Mauriac gives a description of her interaction with the two other men present, “Elle secoua la tête et l’homme la dévorait

toujours des yeux. Devrait-elle, toute sa vie, être ainsi dévisagée?”(18). Mauriac uses the verb “dévorer” to suggest that she is an object to be eaten; one thinks of a wolf wanting to devour its prey. Not only does this verb imply masculine aggression and dominance, but also that she is objectified; she is merely a thing to regard, to imprison, and then to satisfy an appetite. Mauriac uses “dévisagée” in order to ask if Thérèse will spend her life being stared at, or in other words, objectified. Even further, the men are given an animalistic description, a wolf silently regarding its prey. Mauriac employs the adverb “toujours” to suggest that this is a habitual action or a regular description of Thérèse’s life. Not only does the author leave this description for the reader to interpret, but he also employs an interrogative phrase, which simultaneously gives readers access to Thérèse’s thoughts, and allows for the reader to question the role of Thérèse in her own social class; the question also alludes to the lack of self-awareness and identity. This masculine aggression implies that she is a victim and that she is incapable of protecting herself against the more aggressive characters, most especially because she is imprisoned by them.

Each of Thérèse’s interactions with the male figures in her life contrast her nature against theirs; they are controlling and show little regard for her, while she finds even the prospect of having to live every day with her husband Bernard painful and uncomfortable. In these demanding and aggressive interactions, the male authorities become destructive forces, or perhaps, “monstres” of their own kind. As Mauriac describes a conversation between Thérèse, her lawyer, and her father, Mauriac uses these commanding words of her father to a sign of paternal (or masculine) oppression and how it forces Thérèse to take on a role that she does not desire in the least. Thérèse’s father demands that Thérèse play the role of submissive wife as he says, “Il faut que vous soyez comme les deux doigts de la main.....comme les deux doigts de la main, entends-tu ?....Tu feras tout ce que ton mari te dira de faire” (Mauriac 20). Mauriac paints her father as authoritative and demanding by using several words that exude

the desire to control; he uses the phrase “il faut que” which suggests that it is necessary for Thérèse to become submissive to her husband; she has no room to question. This idea of authority continues when her father uses the simple future tense “tu feras” and “ton mari te dira”. The use of this verb tense suggests that Thérèse’s future is decided; again Mauriac creates a sense of finality and resolution. Furthermore, Mauriac indicates the shift in authority. Although Thérèse’s father still has the ultimate control, the final phrase of this citation indicates that she will return to her husband and do whatever he asks of her. While emphasizing this male authority, Thérèse’s father reinforces a social idea of marriage by stating “vous soyez comme les deux doigts de la main”. He repeats this more than once as to ingrain in Thérèse’s mind that she is attached to her husband and she must do what he desires in order to protect the family’s reputation. Mauriac seems to use the role of Thérèse’s father to enforce the rigid and, perhaps, merciless behavior of men. As he underlines the idea of male dominance and Thérèse’s limited role in their conversation, he proves that these men are monstrous by creating a cage for her; she is meant to exist according to man’s definition and there is little room for realizing her own identity.

Her social immobility emphasizes her victimization. The society portrayed in the novel presents two suitable roles for a woman: mother and wife. Thérèse struggles to find happiness or fulfillment in either of these preordained roles, for as far as the reader knows, she only experiences suffering. Mauriac uses Thérèse’s conversations with Bernard in order to show Thérèse’s lack of control of her own societal role. “Thérèse se souvient qu’elle avait fermé les yeux, tandis que deux grandes mains enserraient sa petite tête, et qu’une voix disait contre son oreille: ‘il y a là encore quelques idées fausses.’ Elle avait répondu : ‘À vous de les détruire, Bernard.’” (Mauriac 34). In this citation, Mauriac shifts to the perspective of Thérèse, which allows the reader to view the world through her eyes, a feminine perspective. Mauriac eliminates possession of the “deux grandes mains”, suggesting that it is not only

Bernard's hands that cover her eyes, but perhaps also a male authority in a larger sense. Mauriac continues to refer to this larger authority with "une voix disait," which generalizes Bernard's words, suggesting that is not only Bernard who commands her attention, but masculine authority more generally. The verb "enserrer" suggests that one is being held tightly, which gives the effect of control and an attempt to suppress and overpower. Mauriac continues with this description of suppression by describing "sa petite tête" to give the impression that she is small and fragile in the hands of the masculine presence. He depicts a battle between Thérèse and Bernard; while Bernard denies the validity of Thérèse's thoughts, Thérèse admits defeat, leaving it to him to destroy any chance of free thinking. It is Thérèse's reluctant admittance of "À vous de les détruire," that suggests the limited role of women in the social world of Mauriac's novel; while she has the capacity to think and feel against what Bernard wishes, she leaves it to him to destroy her ideas, fully knowing that woman's role in this society is preordained and fighting it is futile. These "false ideas" of obtaining any sort of freedom as a woman portray Thérèse as a victim. Furthermore, Bernard asserts his authority; all of her thoughts are false, simply because he disagrees. Mauriac's use of aggressive, possessive, and violent words create a monstrous effect, but it is her protagonist's husband, rather than Thérèse herself, who is monstrous, as he seeks to destroy her freedom.

Bernard's desire to destroy Thérèse's free will shows the monstrosity of the patriarchal society; Bernard is a man content with his role in society, but he is constantly worried about his health and Thérèse cannot see a genuine purpose in a life without freedom, ordained by masculine authority. Mauriac underlines this drastic juxtaposition with the following conversation between Thérèse and Bernard: "N'éprouves-tu jamais, comme moi, le sentiment profond de ton inutilité? Non? Ne penses-tu pas que la vie des gens de notre espèce ressemble déjà terriblement à la mort?" (54). Mauriac uses the form of the question not only to represent Thérèse's doubt, but also to show her questioning of her social role. She says

“n’éprouves-tu jamais?” to create a tone of incredulity at their way of life. She asks “comme moi,” wondering if Bernard relates to her and their “inutilité,”. She notes the emptiness in her life, using “notre espèce” to refer to humanity. She does this in order to try and find common ground in their marriage. She continues this asking if he, too, notices this “sentiment profond” of emptiness in their lives. Thérèse’s use of negative interrogative phrases demands an answer from Bernard. The negation implies her conviction in these beliefs and while she asks Bernard to reflect on his uselessness, the phrasing of these questions suggest that Thérèse is reflecting on what she feels is her own “inutilité” and how her role in society resembles “la mort”. While it seems Thérèse is expecting an answer from Bernard, the questions undermine Thérèse’s monstrosity: she does not seek evil. Her tone of incredulity asks Bernard to see and understand the uselessness she feels, but Bernard does not respond, thus she continues to remain isolated in the silence of her imprisonment, her useless social role.

Mauriac creates a tense and controlling atmosphere in describing their marriage. In a conversation between the two characters, Mauriac shows the true nature of their marriage. Thérèse begins, “‘Laissez-moi disparaître, Bernard’, and Bernard angrily responds, “‘Quoi? Vous osez avoir un avis? émettre un vœu? Assez. Pas un mot de plus. Vous n’avez qu’à écouter, qu’à recevoir mes ordres,---à vous conformer à mes décisions irrévocables’”(82). In this passage, Mauriac shows the reality of their relationship. Both characters use the “vous,” in order to show formality; this suggests that their relationship is without intimacy. Mauriac emphasizes this lack of intimacy when Thérèse asks for Bernard to allow her to disappear. She states “laissez-moi,” and while this phrase refers to her desire to no longer be a part of their society, it seems that she is asking his permission to disappear from their lives entirely. Bernard is the authority here. He uses the verb “oser” to create an indignant tone; this tone suggests that Thérèse having an opinion is a very serious “fault”. Furthermore, he suggests

that it is Thérèse's role to be passive, as well as silent. Mauriac creates this effect with Bernard's questioning and eventually with his commands. He uses short phrases such as "assez" and "pas un mot de plus", which allow no room for negotiation. He then gives her commands, while also giving himself an invincible power: "mes ordres" and "mes décisions irrévocables" suggest his infallibility. He can do no wrong and he demands that Thérèse should "conformer" to his decisions. Bernard expects Thérèse to be submissive and silent, and Thérèse, having been suppressed by more than one masculine authority, submits by asking Bernard to let her disappear entirely. Ultimately her desire to disappear is a consequence of her societal role or lack thereof.

Thérèse's incapacity to fight against Bernard shows her weakness, but this is not in a derogatory sense. Bernard, as well as the other male authorities in the novel, are repeatedly described as animalistic. They only seek to control and destroy. Monsters, as they are often represented throughout literature, are creatures of the dark. They, as well as these male authorities, seek to control, destroy, and bring about evil. If these men seek to control Thérèse and destroy any chance of her freedom, who, then, becomes the monster? Furthermore, if these men are what it is to be monstrous, Thérèse must do what she can to combat against the monsters in her life in order to self-preserve. Thérèse's act of poisoning her husband becomes indirectly an act of self-defense. While it fails, Thérèse does whatever she can to preserve her identity, to evade her position as a victim against the "monstrous" male figures who attempt to force her to fit a certain reality.

Conclusion

François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* breaks from the traditional Catholic novel form by depicting the story of an unlikely protagonist. Mauriac immediately invokes the Baudelarian idea of the author as "Créateur", while also bringing light and profundity to his

Thérèse and her suspected “monstrosity”. While focusing Mauriac’s tone and language, this study proves that his treatment of a “monstre” is a new representation of a woman and her rejection of a rigid and limiting lifestyle. In fact, through the analysis of several themes such as religion and social roles, Mauriac transfers the monstrous label from Thérèse to Bernard and his family. As Therese discovers her similarities with the more pure and complex characters of the novel, such as the local priest and Jean Azévédo, she becomes a more well-rounded and complex character. Mauriac begins to tarnish the reputation of the bourgeois Catholic families; they become monstrous in their superficiality, their harsh judgements, and desire to control Thérèse, who becomes a victim in contrast to their undesirable actions. While the de la Traves and Desquerouxes evolve into more monstrous personas, the reader begins to see a drastic departure from many religious and feminine archetypes preceding this novel, especially in Catholic literature. Mauriac celebrates the ambiguity of Thérèse’s nature; in fact, it functions as an example for future literary works: he does not condemn this agnostic woman, guilty of a crime, but rather chooses to leave his protagonist to decide her own fate. Mauriac’s decision to let Thérèse become a master of her own fate, without judgement or condemnation redefines the role of women, Catholic protagonists, and monstrosity in literature.

With his tone and language, Mauriac’s work *Thérèse Desqueyroux* creates more opportunities for diverse representations of religion, women, and human nature itself. Although Mauriac’s literary works are less studied today, they provide the literary canon with complex and rich stories about fallen protagonists making their way in society. A winner of the Nobel Literature Prize and member of the Académie Française, Mauriac is a renowned French author. Some of his works, most especially *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, abandon the classic Catholic conversion story; and while many of his works such as *Noeud de Vipères* end with a conversion, Mauriac does not allow his devotion to the Catholic faith to supersede the dark

and mysterious content of his novels. In fact, it is because of Mauriac's closeness to the Catholic faith that he is capable of exploring the darkness of humanity and sin in ways that few have before. Furthermore, Mauriac's portrayal of women could provide interesting contributions to women's studies in literature. Mauriac's treatment of women, while coming from a male perspective, is highly sympathetic and seeks to treat women with the same judgement as men. All of these areas of study open exciting opportunities for new research.

Another avenue for further study could consider the sequels to the novel. This work could continue to examine the theme of monstrosity, as well as Thérèse's search for self-identification. Another fascinating study would be to compare all of Mauriac's novels and discuss his role as the "Créateur," where one could analyze various endings of his works, whether or not the protagonist converts. Mauriac's work is also incredibly diverse, which opens up an opportunity for a comparative study. During the mid-to-late twentieth century, many Catholic authors produced their works, most especially in the United States and England. These authors also created stories of unlikely protagonists, while focusing on the grotesque and darker human attributes. An incredibly vast and diverse study would be the analysis of Flannery O'Connor's *The Complete Stories* (1946), which contains a series of short stories, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), a novel by British author Evelyn Waugh, and perhaps American author Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* (1961). Each of these contemporary literary works explore themes of monstrosity, humanity's darkness, as well as the question of faith. As well as this, each of these authors revolutionized the form of the Catholic novel by no longer focusing on saintly characters, but rather those who live a dark and often unforgivable lifestyle.

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